

This is a transcription of episode 4 of Season Two of In the Dark. Italics indicate audio. Musical notations and other production elements aren't included. Because there may be imprecisions in the transcript, the audio should be considered the official record of the episode.

Episode 4: The Confessions

Previously on In the Dark.

Denise Kendle: They thought that he did it.

Madeleine Baran: They did?

Denise Kendle: That's what they thought. That's what they was— well, they didn't say he did it, but I think on the first day, that's where they went with their investigation.

Denise Kendle: They was questioning

Randy Stewart: It was a jigsaw puzzle. They throw the pieces in, and they fit. The ones that don't believe it didn't pay attention to the evidence.

Latarsha Blissett: Asked me was I trying to buy a mobile home. Asked me if I knew what \$30,000 could buy, they ended everything with this money to let me know that it's on the table.

Antonio Earl Campbell: He never did hang around much at all no more then. I think that he know he just told, you know, he told a story on Curtis. I think that Curtis should have been out a long time ago.

About six months after the murders at Tardy Furniture, a guy named Morgan McClurg was arrested for stealing. He wound up in a jail cell in Leflore County, Mississippi.

The cell that Morgan was placed in was overcrowded. There were three bunks, and the cell was supposed to fit six people, but Morgan said there were as many as eight or nine of them in there at the same time.

Morgan McClurg: So at night you had all of the beds full plus two or three people sleeping on the floor, and during the day, you know, whoever slept on the floor would pick their mattress up and like fold them up. We'd use them as chairs or whatever.

It was so crowded, there was barely enough room for everyone to stand up at the same time. There was no privacy. You couldn't have a private conversation. You couldn't even turn the page of a book without everyone noticing.

Morgan McClurg: Twenty four hours a day you was in that cell. And we had a shower in there, the bathroom was in there, and a sink was in there, so we never left the cell unless it was to go to court or go to the doctor's appointment or something like that.

One of the other men in that overcrowded cell was Curtis Flowers. Curtis was there awaiting trial. This was in 1997, and by this point, Curtis had already been arrested for the killings at Tardy Furniture.

But Morgan said Curtis didn't seem like a murderer to him.

Morgan McClurg: Myself, I couldn't see him doing it. Not the way he portrayed himself there. I was more comfortable with Curtis than I was with some of the other guys in there. I mean he was always polite. He never got mad at anybody. Never raised his voice. He kept to himself a lot you know playing solitaire on his bunk or watching TV. If he had something and you needed something, he'd let you borrow it or whatever. I mean, he was one of the nicest guys there. I really thought he was going to get off.

Our producer Natalie talked to another man who was in that cell with Curtis for months. His name is Timmy Haymore. Natalie talked to him outside his mom's house. It was kind of noisy because there was a flock of birds in the trees nearby. And Timmy told her that Curtis wasn't like the other inmates. When everyone else would be playing dominoes, Curtis would be reading his Bible and writing letters to his family. And he said Curtis got pretty down at times. Like one day when Curtis just wouldn't get out of bed at all.

Timmy Haymore: And he sat there and he said 'Lord knows, lord knows best. I didn't do this.' That's what he said. And tears were coming out of his eyes. You can feel it, you can feel if you human. You can feel when a person telling the truth and telling a lie. He said 'I didn't do this. I don't know why they charged me with this. I didn't do this.'

"I didn't do this." That's what Curtis Flowers told Timmy Haymore.

But according to District Attorney Doug Evans, Curtis told something else to two other men who were in that cell.

In that crowded little room, in the middle of the night, when everyone else was sleeping, Curtis confessed to the murders at Tardy Furniture two times — in two secret conversations — to two men. One of them was named Maurice Hawkins. The other was named Frederick Veal.

That was the story, at least, that Hawkins and Veal told at Curtis Flowers' first trial, in 1997.

Two men from one cell. Doug Evans told the jurors that Curtis couldn't help himself. Evans said, quote, "As most criminals do, he didn't have the ability not to brag about what he had done."

And Evans presented these two jailhouse informants as credible. He said neither of them got anything in exchange for their statements.

One of the jailhouse snitches, Maurice Hawkins, died in 2016. But the other snitch, Frederick Veal, is still alive.

This is Season 2 of In the Dark, an investigative podcast by APM Reports. I'm Madeleine Baran. This season is about the case of Curtis Flowers, a black man from a small town in Mississippi who's spent the past 21 years fighting for his life — and a white prosecutor who's spent that same time trying just as hard to execute him.

The case against Curtis Flowers came down to three main pieces of evidence — the route, the gun, the confessions. This is an episode about the confessions.

One day in February, our producer Samara went to the suburbs of Atlanta to track down Frederick Veal. She found him in front of his house at the end of a cul-de-sac.

Samara Freemark: Hey, are you Fred Veal by any chance?

Frederick Veal: Yes ma'am.

Samara Freemark: I'm Samara.

Frederick Veal: Who is you?

Samara Freemark: I'm a reporter.

Frederick Veal: (laughs)

Frederick Veal was wearing a black tank top. He had two tattoos of pin-up girls, one on each arm. They went inside. Frederick Veal lives with his wife and daughter who were upstairs watching TV.

Frederick Veal: I got company down here! She can hear everything, it's affecting her ear.

Samara and Frederick sat in his living room. Frederick lit a menthol cigarette.

Frederick Veal: OK, you ready?

Samara Freemark: Yes. So tell me, where does your story start?

Frederick Veal: Well, it started back when I got locked up in Leflore County jail.

Frederick had been arrested for stealing his sister's car. He didn't have money for bail, so he was stuck there, trying to figure out a way to get out.

And Frederick knew his way around the legal system. Over the years, he'd committed a lot of mostly petty crimes, and he got locked up all the time on all kinds of charges. He knew the sheriff, a man named Ricky Banks. And so, Frederick said, he wrote Sheriff Banks a letter.

Frederick Veal: I said, 'Man you need to help me get out.' And he called me out, shackled me down and had them bring me down to talk to him.

Frederick said Sheriff Banks made him an offer.

Frederick Veal: He said, 'Mr Veal. I got something for you to do. I'mma let you go if you work with us.' I said, "Whatchoo..." He said, 'I can help you get out of here.' I said, 'Well, I'd do anything to get out of here, man. I don't want to sit up in this jail, man.'

Frederick said Sheriff Banks told him that he could use his help in this murder case the cops had going. The sheriff told him that the cops had a man named Curtis Flowers sitting in this jail right now. Curtis hadn't gone to trial yet. This was back in 1997, before the first trial.

Frederick Veal: He said, 'I'm gonna put you in the cell with Curtis Flowers. And uh, if you can get some information out of him that he did that murder, I'll let you go.'

Samara Freemark: And did you know who Curtis Flowers was at that point?

Frederick Veal: Never seen him a day in my life. I hadn't even heard about the story. I was locked up. I didn't know nothing about no murder or none of that in Winona. I didn't know nothing about that. And I said, 'Well, OK. I don't know him. I go in and talk to him and see can I get something out of him.' And he put me in the cell the same day. Told me pack my stuff and go in there and put me in the same cell.

Frederick said he was sent there on a mission, to try to try to get a confession out of Curtis Flowers. But, he said, he didn't follow through.

Samara Freemark: So did you try to get anything out of Curtis?

Frederick Veal: No. I didn't try. I didn't ask him nothing. I didn't even say nothing to him. He was to himself. He didn't talk much. He watch TV. He didn't say much. He didn't say much to nobody, just a laid-back type of guy. He don't look like no murderer.

Frederick said that after a few days Sheriff Banks called him back to the office.

Frederick Veal: He said, 'What did you get from Curtis?' I said, 'I can't get nothing out of him. I ain't said nothing to him. He didn't look like he, you know, just want to talk.'

And Frederick thought that would be the end of it. But, he said, it wasn't. Frederick said he met with Sheriff Banks and the district attorney, Doug Evans, together.

Frederick Veal: Then they tell me, 'Oh we're going to do it this way then. We gonna tell you what to say.' I said, 'OK. I'll work with you. You let me go, I'm down with you. I want to get out.' He said, "you can go today." I said, 'OK. Come on, let's run it.'

And he said the sheriff and Doug Evans started telling him all these details about the murders at Tardy Furniture.

Frederick Veal: I didn't know nothing about that case, about the people that got killed or nothing, at this furniture store. Darbys or Harbys, Tardy or something. They told me that. I didn't know nothing about the case.

Samara Freemark: Oh, so how did —

Frederick Veal: About the .380 and all that. I don't know. I'm not a gun man so I really don't know what a 380 from a 950, a 3-5-7.

Samara Freemark: Oh really?

Frederick Veal: Yeah. I'm not a gun person. I'm scared of guns.

Samara Freemark: How did they tell you? Did they show you any documents? Or did they just tell you?

Frederick Veal: They showed me pictures. Pictures of the gruesome scene.

Samara Freemark: They did?

Frederick Veal: Yeah, they showed me pictures of the gruesome scene. Pictures. And it was gruesome too. And they said, 'You want him to get away with this shit here? Look, look, look at this shit.' Doug Evans had all the pictures sitting in front of me, Doug Evans, the prosecutor, gruesome pictures. I shouldn't have seen them pictures.

And Frederick says that together he and the sheriff and the D.A. Doug Evans put together a story.

On March 11, 1997, Frederick Veal gave a taped statement to the D.A.'s investigator, John Johnson, saying that Curtis Flowers confessed to him.

Samara Freemark: Here, let me show you—can I show you some of these documents? (flipping of paper) Hold on.

Samara brought the transcript to her interview with Frederick, to see what he'd make of it twenty one years later.

Frederick Veal: What is that? My statement?

Samara Freemark: I'll show you here, let's see

The story that Frederick Veal had told, about Curtis confessing, took place over a late-night game of dominoes.

Fred Veal: (reading the transcript) Playing dominoes — staying up all night

It was around four in the morning, and everyone else was sleeping. And so, Frederick was the only one who heard what Curtis said.

Fred Veal: (reading the transcript) He killed them people

Curtis told him that he'd killed four people at a furniture store. Curtis told him, quote, "That he was mad, and he went in there and he just clicked."

Fred Veal: (reading the transcript) He was mad and went in there and just clicked. He did not say why he clicked.

Curtis told him he killed the lady first and the little boy last. He said he didn't want to kill the boy, but he couldn't leave any witnesses.

Frederick Veal: (reading the transcript) I did this by myself and as long as I am, nobody's going to tell on me. Because I'm not going to tell on myself.

Curtis used the money he stole from the store — about twenty-something-hundred dollars — to buy crack, a lot of crack. Frederick said Curtis told him that he'd started off, quote, "Buying a hundred dollar piece and before he knew it, he said he had smoked up to \$1,000."

Frederick Veal: (reading the transcript) Crack? Crack cocaine? (laughs) I don't know.

Samara Freemark: Yeah. And then this quote, like, 'I'm not worried. All they got on me is circumstantial evidence. I'm going to beat this.'

Frederick Veal: Circumstantial evidence. That's Doug Evans. (laughs)

Samara Freemark: Doug Evans?

Frederick Veal: That's Doug Evans on that. I wouldn't think of nothing like that to save my life. Most of that stuff is stuff they put together.

The same day that Frederick Veal gave this statement to John Johnson, back in March of 1997, he got out of jail. Because that very same day, Frederick's sister — the one he'd stolen the car from — dropped the charges.

Frederick Veal: Yeah, the charges were dropped. But they let me go, so I was out.

We went to ask Frederick's sister Sheila about this, and Sheila said that was so long ago she can't remember what happened to those charges.

Frederick Veal got out of jail. He went home. And some time later — he's not sure exactly how much later it was — he said he got a call from Doug Evans.

Frederick Veal: Said, 'Are you willing to go to court? Mr. Veal, would you go to court and testify that he told you that he killed them people?' I said, 'Yes sir.' He said, 'If he get convicted, it's a reward in it and I'll make sure you get all the money.' I'm young too, broke and young. I said, 'OK, sure, yeah, sure.'

Frederick took this reward talk seriously. He said Doug Evans told him that there was a \$30,000 reward in the case, and that if he testified against Curtis he could split that reward with the other

jailhouse snitch, Maurice Hawkins, who was also going to testify against Curtis. And so, Frederick started dreaming about what he could buy with fifteen thousand dollars.

He had this idea that he could use this money to transform himself into, as he put it, a thug.

Frederick Veal: I said, I'm gonna be like a thug. I was looking at jewelry, rings, everything. I said I'm going to go get gold put in my mouth and everything, tattoos, everything. Promised people I'm gonna get them money and this and that when I get my money, all kinds of crap.

Samara Freemark: Really?

Fred Veal: Yeah, I went car shopping. Said I'm gonna get me a new car.

Samara Freemark: What kind of car did you want?

Frederick Veal: I think it was a Malibu, a Chevy Malibu, yeah, old school.

Samara Freemark: And so you actually went to the car dealer.

Frederick Veal: I went everywhere.

Samara Freemark: You're like what can I get for—

Frederick Veal: Clothes, new clothes, everything. Oh yeah.

Samara Freemark: You made like a, like a wish list.

Frederick Veal: A wish list, yes.

And so Frederick went to Tupelo for Curtis Flowers' first trial. He was going to hold up his part of the bargain, and then, he was going to get his money. And at first, everything seemed to be going great.

Frederick Veal: So they pay for my hotel and everything, nice hotel, good eating food, hundred dollar cash in my pocket.

Maurice Hawkins, the other jailhouse snitch, was there, too. Frederick said the two of them shared a hotel room.

Frederick Veal: Me and him had the same, we had a big ol' hotel with double beds and restaurant, all that. But before we went into the courtroom, before they took us to the courtroom, Doug Evans came to our room and went over what to say, rehearsing me on how the defense team gonna come at me. Everything was just like going to school, and you teaching me what to say and how to do things.

Samara Freemark: So he's like prepping you?

Frederick Veal: Uh huh. Yeah. So pretty much when I went to court I was prepared. I know, when they came at me, I know what to say. I just say what I say, what he told me to say. I did, I went up there, and I did it perfectly too. I didn't miss a beat. And they said, 'You did a good job up there on the stand.'

I've read the transcript of Frederick Veal's testimony. And he's right — he did do a really good job of telling this story.

He clearly had command of it — the late-night domino game, the confession, Curtis' anger, his drug use, this whole story of a heart to heart between two cellmates.

Frederick Veal tells the jurors, quote, "The only thing I have to say is if a person do something like that, it's cruel. That is hard. The way those folks were killed was hard. If a person do something like that, something gots to be wrong with him."

In his closing argument in that first trial, Doug Evans told the jurors that Frederick Veal and Maurice Hawkins, quote, "had absolutely nothing to gain" by making their statements.

"This information came to the investigators," Evans said. "They followed it up. They took the statements, and it is verified."

And, Evans said, quote, "Frederick Veal and Maurice Hawkins are the two final elements that make this case beyond any doubt, not just beyond a reasonable doubt."

Frederick Veal told Samara that he was actually pretty surprised that anyone took him seriously at all. Like if he was a juror and he was looking at himself, Frederick Veal, sitting up there in the witness box, he would be like, "No way. That guy?"

Frederick Veal: I'm not a credible witness. Why you gonna take me on the stand? I'm not credible. I've got a misdemeanor record longer than Texas, over a hundred some misdemeanors. I'm a convicted felon. I'm in jail, too. I mean (laughs) how you gonna convict him on my statement? That's what I want to know. How you get convicted on my statement? But it worked out for them. It worked out for them. He got convicted.

Frederick said that after the trial, he started asking Doug Evans for his \$15,000.

Frederick Veal: I said, 'Where the money at, man?' After he got convicted, I said, 'Where's the money?' 'We gonna get in touch with you.' So time was passing by. I said, 'Man, that man ain't got in touch with me.' Every time I called, they won't let me talk to him. So I go up there, they won't let me talk to him.

Samara Freemark: Wait. So you would actually call Doug Evans or go to this office—. Did you ever go to his office?

Frederick Veal: Uh, huh. But they never let me talk to him. I ran them down and ran them down. I still didn't get nothing, nothing out the deal. I didn't even see Doug Evans after that. I said, Oh, OK. I say, OK, y'all played me. I said OK OK OK.

Samara Freemark: And so they never - you never got any money.

Frederick Veal: I never got my money.

Frederick Veal and Maurice Hawkins never testified again before a jury in the case of Curtis Flowers.

About a year or so after Frederick Veal took the stand and said that Curtis had confessed to him, he recanted. He told Curtis' lawyers that the story wasn't true, that Curtis had not confessed to him.

Frederick Veal also signed an affidavit in 2016, saying that Curtis never confessed to him, and that Doug Evans and Sheriff Ricky Banks had met with him to make up a story. The affidavit says mostly what Frederick Veal told Samara, except that in the affidavit version, Veal said the money was offered by the D.A.'s investigator, John Johnson, and that the amount was \$30,000.

Maurice Hawkins also signed an affidavit. He signed his in 2015. And in that affidavit, Hawkins said that the story he told in court wasn't true. He said Curtis never confessed to him. Less than a year after signing that affidavit, Maurice Hawkins died.

Those two affidavits are being used right now in Curtis' appeal. The kind of appeal that's happening right now is something called a post-conviction. It's when you can bring in new evidence that has never been considered at trial. Curtis' lawyers are hoping these affidavits, along with other new information, will help convince the court to overturn Curtis' latest conviction and death sentence.

It's been nearly 21 years since Frederick Veal got up on the stand and told a jury that Curtis Flowers had confessed to a quadruple murder. Frederick's testimony had helped convince jurors to convict Curtis Flowers and sentence him to death.

Frederick Veal: You talked to Curtis Flowers?

Samara Freemark: I haven't. You got a message for him?

Frederick Veal: I don't know. Seriously, I do not know. I was young and stupid. That's just like me putting a gun to that man's head and blowing their brains out. That's the way it went.

Jailhouse snitches are used all the time in jails and courtrooms all over the country. But exactly how often they're used, we don't know, because it's not tracked.

I talked to a law professor at UC-Irvine about this. Her name is Alexandra Natapoff. She studies the government's use of informants, including jailhouse snitches. She told me the way this works, it's like a business.

Alexandra Natapoff: Everything is negotiated. In effect we're running an enormous market, and so trading information is just one way that people navigate that market.

And in this market, where information is traded, the value of that information often depends on the case. In a case with a lot of evidence, Natapoff told me, prosecutors often don't need or even want a snitch.

Alexandra Natapoff: But we see over and over and time and time again, in a weak case, in a case where it's difficult to prove guilt, that jailhouse informants fill in the gap either because they come forward themselves entrepreneurially, because so many people in the jail system understand that if they come forward they will be rewarded or because the government reaches out.

When prosecutors use snitches, there are some rules that they have to follow. If the case goes to trial, a prosecutor is required to disclose anything given or promised to a snitch in exchange for the snitch's statement.

And, prosecutors are not allowed to use snitches at trial who they know are lying. That's true not just of snitches, but of any witnesses. Natapoff told me that's a just basic requirement of being a prosecutor.

Alexandra Natapoff: So the prosecutor has a constitutional obligation not to use a witness who they know is committing perjury, in the same way that they have a constitutional obligation to disclose a benefit if they go to trial. The Supreme Court has told us over and over again that prosecutors are special, that it is not just their job to get convictions, but to do justice, that they are representatives of the government, of the sovereign and that at the end of the day the most important thing is for the prosecutor to proceed in an ethical manner that serves justice. And the truth is we rely on that.

In court, Doug Evans has always maintained that as far as he knew, Frederick Veal and Maurice Hawkins were telling the truth when they said that Curtis had confessed. Evans and the sheriff, Ricky Banks, have both said in court that neither one of these men got anything in exchange for their statements — no money, no plea deal, no dropped charges. Nothing.

I tried to ask Doug Evans about this, but he declined to comment. So I decided to give Ricky Banks a call. He's still the sheriff of Leflore County.

Ricky Banks: Sheriff Banks.

Madeleine Baran: Hi, Sheriff Banks. This is Madeleine Baran. I'm a reporter. It's good to talk to you.

Ricky Banks: What you got going?

Madeleine Baran: Yeah, so I wanted to give you a call to see if I could see what you could possibly remember about a man named Frederick Veal.

Ricky Banks: Yeah, yeah, I know the name. He's just a small-time guy. He was, you know, he was in trouble in and out. But it was small crimes. It wasn't nothing like murder or armed robbery or anything like that. But I hadn't heard from him in a good while.

Madeleine Baran: Okay

Ricky Banks: What you—has he done something upstate or something? What's going on?

Madeleine Baran: No, not that I know of, no. I was wanting to just talk to you because of his involvement in the Curtis Flowers case.

Ricky Banks: Yeah. What about that Curtis Flowers case?

Madeleine Baran: Do you remember him being in the jail? Because he's the guy who said that Curtis confessed to him in the jail.

Ricky Banks: Uh, no, I'd have to look back. So I know that there was an inmate during that time, the short time that we held Flowers, and I think it was an inmate that came forward and said that he told him that he did the shooting.

Madeleine Baran: So do you remember, um, how Frederick Veal came to be in the cell with Curtis?

Ricky Banks: No, I don't.

Madeleine Baran: OK. And do you know if he got anything in exchange for his statement?

Ricky Banks: I do not know.

Madeleine Baran: So we ended up tracking him down. And he was saying that he, that what had happened was that he was in jail. And that he wanted to get out of jail. He was like looking for a way to get out. And so he like appealed to you basically. What he said is that you basically made him an offer, like if you can go into the cell and get Curtis to admit to these murders, then you can get out. And he said 'I went in but I actually didn't even ask Curtis.' And then he said he came out and he told you, well, he didn't actually confess. And then what Frederick Veal is saying is what happened next is that he was in a room with yourself and with the district attorney Doug Evans, and the three of you made up a story about Curtis confessing.

Ricky Banks: (laughs) I haven't made up a story about anything. I don't make up a story. I wouldn't be here if I made stories up, and I've been here since 1972. So, no.

Madeleine Baran: No. So what do you make of him saying that?

Ricky Banks: I didn't meet with the D.A. and anybody else to discuss the statement that you're talking about.

Madeleine Baran: OK. So did you send him in, though, to begin with?

Ricky Banks: I don't—. How long has that been? Twenty years ago?

Madeleine Baran: Twenty one years ago, yeah.

Ricky Banks: Yeah, I couldn't tell you whether I sent one or not twenty years ago.

Madeleine Baran: OK. Do you keep—.

Ricky Banks: You got — I think you got enough. So I'm not going to sit here and talk to you. You're trying to put words in my mouth, and I don't know whether they're true or not, OK?

Madeleine Baran: Yeah, no I wouldn't —

Ricky Banks: I guess you're going to go back and if I testified or if he testified, then it'll be on the record, OK?

Madeleine Baran: Yeah.

Ricky Banks: I've got to go. I've got to go to work. I ain't got time for news reports. OK? I'll see you later. Bye.

Madeleine Baran: OK.

(Sheriff Banks hangs up)

Madeleine Baran: Thanks for talking to me.

So, Doug Evans had lost his two snitches, but that didn't matter as much as you might think, because, according to Doug Evans, Curtis Flowers confessed again to another inmate. This time, it happened in Parchman prison.

And this new snitch wasn't like the other two, because this snitch stuck around. He's testified in trial after trial, including Curtis' most recent one. If Curtis has a seventh trial, this guy will most likely be there.

And the story of what is going on with this snitch took us an entire year to uncover.

This snitch's name is Odell Hallmon.

More about that after the break.

(BREAK)

The story of how this new jailhouse informant came to be part of the Curtis Flowers case actually starts with his sister, a woman named Patricia Hallmon.

Patricia lived in Winona. Back in 1996, she was 26 years old and she was Curtis' next door neighbor. And a few weeks after the murders at Tardy Furniture, she ended up telling an investigator all kinds of things — like that she saw Curtis on the morning of the murders running into his house like he was in a rage. And that in the days before the murders, she'd overheard an argument between Curtis and his girlfriend, and she said she'd heard Curtis say something to his girlfriend that she assumed was about his job at Tardy Furniture. She said Curtis said, quote, "Fuck everybody down there."

And when the trial came around, Patricia Hallmon testified to all of this as a witness for the prosecution. And she's testified in every trial since.

Natalie and I spent weeks searching for Patricia Hallmon. We found out that she'd moved to Jackson, about an hour and a half from Winona. And so, one day in September of last year, we went to talk to her.

Madeleine Baran: Hi Ms. Patricia? How's your morning going?

Patricia Hallmon: All right

And right away, Patricia Hallmon started telling me things that were different from what she'd testified to during the Curtis Flowers trials.

Madeleine Baran: Did you ever hear him like talk about like hurting people at the store or his job in like a negative way?

Patricia Hallmon: No, no, no, no, no, no.

Madeleine Baran: Or anything negative at work?

Patricia Hallmon: No, no, no. I ain't never heard that boy say nothing negative at work. Never.

Madeleine Baran: Or about work or anything?

Patricia Hallmon: No, no, ma'am. No. No. No, ma'am. Ain't gonna lie for nobody. No ma'am. Wasn't no kind of talk about nobody murder nobody or no nothing wrong with his job. Ain't nobody said—. He ain't act like no violent person. No, ma'am. He did not.

Patricia told me that Curtis Flowers was a nice person. She called him the sweetest gentleman, the sweetest person you'd ever want to know.

Patricia Hallmon: He acted like the sweetest gentleman. I'm talking about a lovable, sweetable gentleman. The sweetest person you want to know.

When I asked Patricia why her story had changed, why it was different from what she said in court, she didn't want to talk about it.

Patricia Hallmon: I don't really have nothing, really nothing else to say. I'm just tired, y'all need to wrap this stuff up and leave it alone. I'm tired.

In Curtis' first trial, Curtis' lawyers tried to challenge Patricia on the stand, but unlike when Patricia talked to me, in court, Patricia just stuck to her story. It seemed like there wasn't anything the defense could do to get her to crack.

But then, one day, as Curtis' lawyers were preparing for his second trial, they got a letter. And this letter said that Patricia Hallmon's story was a lie.

And the letter came from Patricia's own brother — a man named Odell Hallmon.

The letter was a single page, written in neat cursive, on a sheet of lined paper that had been singed at the edges, like a pirate's treasure map. "My name is Odell Hallmon," it read, "and I am writing in concern of a case you is handling — The case of Curtis Flowers. My sister was a witness in that case."

In this letter, Odell Hallmon said that his sister Patricia's testimony was something the two of them had cooked up together to try to get some reward money.

The letter was addressed to Curtis' lawyer at the time, a man named Chokwe Lumumba.

"It started at the county jail," Odell wrote. "I had a fine to pay off and I didn't have the money. So I told her to tell the polices she knew who committed these murders so she could get that \$30,000 dollars and get me out."

Odell went on — “I’m truly sorry everything happen this way. I never thought Curtis would be found guilty. All I was thinking about at that time was myself. Mr. Lumumba, I’m willing to do anything in my power to make up for what I did. I’m truly sorry for what me and my sister did.”

The letter ended, “My sister is a born liar. She is the worstest child my mother have. She just like me, do anything for money. Mr. Lumumba, I hope that I can be of some use to you. I never thought things would have gotten out of hand like this. Thanks for listening.”

The defense did listen, and they put Odell Hallmon on the stand to testify at Curtis’ second trial in 1999. Odell told the jurors just what he’d said in the letter.

And he said that he’d decided to come forward because, quote, “my conscience was bothering me.”

But it wasn’t long before Odell Hallmon switched sides.

VIDEO: (makes a click sound) John Johnson: Today’s date is May the 7th of the year 2001. The location is the Carroll Montgomery County jail facility in Vaiden, Mississippi, and the following is a voluntary statement from Odell Hallmon.

I got a copy of a video that was recorded by law enforcement in a jail in Vaiden, Mississippi in May of 2001. It’s an interview of Odell Hallmon by the District Attorney’s investigator John Johnson.

It’d been only two or three years since Odell Hallmon had written to the lawyer for Curtis Flowers offering to help the defense. Now in 2001, Odell Hallmon was offering that same help this time to the prosecution.

VIDEO: John Johnson: and I would point out that this statement is free and voluntary on your part, is that correct?

Odell Hallmon: Yes, sir.

In this video, Odell Hallmon is sitting in a chair on the right of the frame, and John Johnson is on the opposite side.

Odell’s 25 at the time. He’s a big guy, with wide-set eyes, a chinstrap beard and a buzz cut. He’s wearing an orange jumpsuit and his hands are cuffed in front of him, and he keeps twisting his fingers together, and darting his eyes around the room.

John Johnson is wearing a button down short-sleeved shirt and tie. He’s wearing glasses and holding a stack of papers. He has a legal pad open on his lap. It’s 11:33 in the morning on May 7, 2001.

VIDEO: John Johnson: You are contacting us and volunteering this statement, is that correct?

Odell Hallmon: Right, right.

John Johnson: That we haven't promised you any reward or smooth treatment or nothing, is that correct?

Odell Hallmon: No, sir. You didn't promise me nothing.

And here's what Odell told them. He said that he'd lied when he testified for the defense. He said that actually his sister Patricia had always been telling the truth about Curtis. And he said the reason that he helped the defense, the reason that he testified in the second trial that his sister was a liar, was because Curtis asked him to when they were hanging out together in prison.

VIDEO: Odell Hallmon: I asked him what was in it for me and he told me, he said, 'I can get you some money and while you here I can take care of you while you are here locked up and I can get you some money when you get out.'

"I can get you some money." "Take care of you while you are here locked up."

VIDEO: Odell Hallmon: Just to tell them folk what he wanted me to tell them. So I, we sat there and we made up a good lie and I just told it.

John Johnson: When he said that he would take care of you did — cigarettes was somewhat of a commodity while in that facility, is that correct?

Odell Hallmon: Yes, sir.

John Johnson: And they were hard to come by, and you, he was providing cigarettes for you you indicated. Is that right?

Odell Hallmon: Right, right.

John Johnson: And you said that he had money and was able to get cigarettes where you were not able to.

Odell Hallmon: Yes, sir.

And not just cigarettes. Odell said Curtis had promised to give him some money once he got out of prison.

VIDEO: John Johnson: And what else did he say as far as money or reward?

Odell Hallmon: Yeah, he told me, he said he got thousands and thousands of dollars right there.

"Thousands and thousands of dollars."

VIDEO: Odell Hallmon: He was telling me he said, 'I can get you about \$15,000 once you get out of here.'

"I can get you about \$15,000 once you get out of here."

VIDEO: Odell Hallmon: You know, money at the time, I can do anything for it. You say this, that's what it was.

"You know money at the time. I can do anything for it."

VIDEO: Odell Hallmon: I didn't see another better way of getting it.

John Johnson: Basically, going back in a review of this, you are just admitting that you lied and worked with Curtis Flowers and made up a story to try to discredit your sister's testimony, is that correct?

Odell Hallmon: Yes, sir. I lied, I did that.

After 10 minutes, the interview was over.

VIDEO: John Johnson: We only wanted the truth. Is that correct?

Odell Hallmon: The truth.

John Johnson: Well, that will conclude the statement, and the time is now 11:48 AM.

But then, three hours later, for some reason, they did a second interview with Odell Hallmon. And when they turned the recorder back on, Odell was sitting in the same room, in the same chair. He was wearing the same orange scrubs. John Johnson was still there.

VIDEO: John Johnson: The location is the Carroll Montgomery County Regional Jail facility in Vaiden. Present is Odell Hallmon.

I don't know what happened between these two recordings, but apparently someone contacted Odell's lawyer, a man named Lee Bailey.

VIDEO: John Johnson: Mr. Hallmon, you are represented by your attorney here today, Mr. Lee Bailey. And you have contacted us through your attorney indicating that you want to give a statement as to what occurred between you and Curtis Flowers. Is that true?

Odell Hallmon: Yes, sir.

The second time around, Odell didn't just say that Curtis had asked him to lie about his sister. Now the story was much more elaborate. Odell laid out a whole psychodrama between himself and Curtis. Two men locked up, each trying to get something, each trying to get away with something, neither of them sure whom to trust.

Odell said he was angry that Curtis still hadn't paid him the money. Odell said he even confronted Curtis about it.

VIDEO: Odell Hallmon: I said, 'Man, you just promised me the money if I just get up there and lie on my sister, you're going back on your word.'

I said, "Man, you just promised me the money if I just get up there and lie on my sister, you're going back on your word."

And Curtis replied, "What is a man's word?"

VIDEO: Odell Hallmon: And he said, 'What is a man's word?'

And from there, Odell described how he and Curtis would pass notes back and forth to each other in their cells, cryptic notes. In one, Curtis told him how weak his conscience was.

VIDEO: Odell Hallmon:how weak his conscience was.

And Odell started to feel uneasy. He started to think — maybe this guy that I helped really is a murderer. He tried to ask Curtis if he killed the people at Tardy Furniture.

VIDEO: Odell Hallmon: I said 'Homie, you keep on telling me this and that, but tell me the truth. Did you really do it?' He just smiled at me. Just smiled at me every time.

Curtis just smiled at him. He smiled every time.

One day, Odell looked Curtis straight in the eye and told him, "Curtis, man, I see death in your eyes."

VIDEO: Odell Hallmon: I said, 'Curtis, man, I see death in your eyes.'

Curtis got mad. He jumped up. He said, "What are you trying to do? Are you trying to tell people I killed those folks? Is that what you're doing?"

And Odell said, "Well, Curtis, you can answer a question for me. Did you really kill them?"

VIDEO: Odell Hallmon: I said, did you really kill them?

Curtis didn't answer.

VIDEO: Odell Hallmon: He didn't answer me that day.

And then, Curtis fell silent. Odell waited three days.

VIDEO: Odell Hallmon: He waited like three days.

And then, a note arrived. It was from Curtis.

VIDEO: Odell Hallmon: He said, 'Homie, a man...

Curtis' note said, "Homie, a man gotta be a fool to tell on himself."

And with that Odell realized that this man he'd been helping, Curtis Flowers, was a murderer.

VIDEO: Odell Hallmon: He told me man, I know it. You know I knew he did.

John Johnson: You're saying he told you that he did but he did it in an indirect way?

Odell Hallmon: Right.

And after Odell Hallmon had laid out this whole story, the interview was over.

VIDEO: John Johnson: All right. It's approximately three minutes after 3:00, and that concludes the statement.

And Odell turns his head. He looks straight at the camera. He blinks. The screen goes black.

VIDEO: (Click off, static ends)

In the first version of the story, Odell had said he'd lied about his sister. In the second version, Odell had said that Curtis had implied he'd killed the people at Tardy Furniture.

But there was another version of Odell's story — a third version.

This third version of Odell's story came in the form of a letter written by Odell to the district attorney Doug Evans.

And this letter would prove much more valuable than anything Odell Hallmon had said in those videos.

I have a copy of this letter. It's handwritten in a neat slanting cursive.

This letter begins, "To Doug Evans. On the case of Curtis Flowers, my role in the case and everything he told me, this I swear."

In the letter, Odell wrote, quote, "One day in the dayroom Curtis told me that he had a lot on his mind and he couldn't keep living like this. He said he would kill himself. And I said, 'If you was innocent you would not be thinking like that.' And he said, 'Homeboy, that's the problem. I'm not innocent.'"

At Curtis' third trial in 2004, Odell Hallmon took the stand for the prosecution.

The other snitches, Frederick Veal and Maurice Hawkins, were gone. But Odell, the new snitch, was ready.

He told the jury that Curtis Flowers had confessed to him. And the district attorney Doug Evans said the same thing about Odell that he said about the earlier snitches — that Odell was credible and that he didn't get anything in exchange for his statement.

And Odell's told that same story about Curtis confessing to him in every trial since.

I talked to the defense lawyer who cross-examined Odell Hallmon. His name is Ray Charles Carter, and he was Curtis' lawyer from trials three through six. Ray Charles Carter told me Odell didn't just say that Curtis confessed to him. By the latest trial, in 2010, Odell was spinning this whole story of personal redemption.

Ray Charles Carter: He'd tell you he'd gotten his life together. He's not what he used to be and all this kind of crap. I don't believe any of it, but he felt like he needed to say it.

On cross examination, Ray Charles Carter asked Odell, quote, "When did you start telling the truth? When did you become honest?"

And Odell told him, he's trying to become a better person because Odell said, quote, "I know there's a God in heaven, and I know that I got to see him soon because I'm going through a medical crisis right now, so I want to get myself right with God."

Odell said, "I got a conscience, Mr. Charles. I know I do. Lord knows I do."

This medical crisis that Odell was referring to was that he'd been diagnosed as HIV positive. This was in 2010, and by 2010 being HIV positive for most people in the United States was no longer a death sentence. But Odell certainly made it seem like it was.

Ray Charles Carter: Dying of AIDS, too, and I felt like that was just clearly trying to make them feel sympathetic, and I think he might have even said, 'I wouldn't be on my, on death's bed basically and come in here and lie.' I think he's one of the biggest liars I ever met in my life. And I kind of scanned the jury, if I'm remembering it correctly, because I wanted to see if they were perceiving him as a full of you know what, or whether they actually believed him. They actually sat there and looked at him with, with seriousness, as if they actually believed him, which defies logic to me. And that told me a story right there, too. We, we have no chance. If they're not rejecting this guy, we can't possibly have a chance.

We talked to six of the twelve jurors who sat on Curtis' latest trial, and none of them had anything negative to say about Odell Hallmon's testimony.

This a juror from trial six named Janelle Johnson.

Janelle Johnson: I believed him. You know, I don't think he had anything, he didn't have anything to gain by coming in there, you know. I believed him. To me, I feel like maybe he was trying to do the right thing, actually.

If the case against Curtis Flowers had stronger evidence, like DNA or people who witnessed the actual murders, then a snitch like Odell Hallmon probably wouldn't have as much value to the prosecutor, and it wouldn't matter as much whether Odell was telling the truth.

But right now, Odell Hallmon's testimony is the only piece of so-called direct evidence against Curtis Flowers. Everything else the prosecutor has is circumstantial — the route that Curtis supposedly walked on the morning of the murders, the gun that Curtis supposedly stole and used to kill all four people. None of that adds up to 100 percent proof. Far from it.

The prosecutor has no evidence that proved that Curtis was even at the furniture store that morning, much less that he pulled the trigger. The best evidence the D.A. Doug Evans has is the word of one man — Odell Hallmon.

And so, I decided to find out everything I could about Odell Hallmon. One of the first things I learned was that almost no one calls him Odell Hallmon. Most people just call him Cookie.

His sister Patricia told me why.

Patricia Hallmon: Back in the day Cookie Monster from Sesame Street, and he ate, he just keep eating all the cookies and stuff. He just ate nothing but cookies, cookies, cookies, so we called him Cookie Monster.

Madeleine Baran: Really?

Patricia Hallmon: Yeah.

Madeleine Baran: Like when he was a little kid?

Patricia Hallmon: Uh huh. When he was a little kid who came on up in it, Cookie. Yeah, we called him Cookie Monster. Well we called him Cookie Monster and as he grew they took the monster off and just said Cookie.

One person who was knew Odell well was Joann Young. You might remember her from episode two. She's the woman who helped me out when I was interviewing Roy Harris, the man who testified about seeing Curtis on the route that morning. Joann has actually known Odell since the day he was born. She helped deliver him.

Joann Young: He was the most beautiful big baby I ever seen. Really. Oh, he was handsome. Everybody would come off the street, would just come and look at that baby. But he was, he was spoiled. I remember when I used to see him in the store, he would get whatever he want. If he cried for it, he got it.

Madeleine Baran: So he was spoiled?

Joann Young: Yes. Not only his mother and auntie would spoil him, other people would spoil, you know, had spoiled.

Madeleine Baran: Why?

Joann Young: You know, because he was a cute, fat little 'ol, chubby little 'ol thang!

But Joann said that as Odell got older, he turned bad.

Joann Young: When he got teenage, when he got teenage, started getting in trouble, I just couldn't believe it. And then I thought about it, yeah, because he never worked for nothing. So that's what I figured that what it was.

When Odell was a teenager, he started getting arrested and going to jail and Joann would run into him every time he got out, and every time, she'd give him a good talking-to.

Joann Young: I talked, I said, 'You finally done got out, huh? You gonna' straighten yourself up?' 'Oh, Ms. Joann, yeah I'm gonna be good. I'm gonna be good, I'm gonna be good.' I said, 'No, you ain't gonna' be good.' I said, 'Odell, let me tell you one thing.' I said, 'Life is too short.' I said, 'Odell, straighten your life up.'

But Odell didn't straighten up. And Joann said he didn't really need to. Joann said that Odell seemed to get away with a lot. He would commit crimes. He would be sent away. And then before you'd know it, he'd be back in town, up to his old tricks, causing trouble again.

Joann said she could never figure out how exactly Odell never seemed to get punished all that hard. The District Attorney Doug Evans certainly had a reputation for being tough on crime, but when it came to Odell, she said, the rules seemed different.

Joann Young: Odell got away with everything. He got privilege, a lot of privilege.

Privilege. That's next time on In the Dark.

In the Dark is reported and produced by me, Madeleine Baran. Senior producer Samara Freemark, producer Natalie Jablonski, associate producer Rehman Tungekar, and reporters Parker Yesko and Will Craft.

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We put the videos of Odell Hallmon's two interviews with the D.A.'s investigator on our website. You can check them out at inthedarkpodcast.org We also have all kinds of other videos and photos and documents on the site.

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